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Israel and Palestinians Set Goal of a Treaty in 2008

By STEVEN LEE MYERS and HELENE COOPER

ANNAPOLIS, Md., Nov. 27 — The Israeli and Palestinian leaders committed themselves on Tuesday to negotiate a peace treaty by the end of 2008, setting a deadline for ending a conflict that has endured for six decades.

The agreement stopped short of the binding negotiating outline that many Palestinians had hoped for, but it revived a peace process that the United States had left dormant for seven years.

Its success, both sides said, will depend in part on how vigorously President Bush pushes Palestinians and Israelis toward resolving the core issues that have bedeviled peace negotiators since 1979: the dismantling of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, the borders of a Palestinian state, the status of Jerusalem and the fate of Palestinian refugees who left, or were forced to leave, their homes in Israel.

In announcing the agreement at an American-sponsored peace conference here, Mr. Bush plunged the United States back into the role of an Arab-Israeli peacemaker — an approach he had previously shunned — at a time when wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have helped bring the American image in the Muslim world to historic lows.

But in Gaza, reaction to the peace conference was far from favorable. Crowds of more than 100,000 protested the conference. A Palestinian man was reported killed at a West Bank protest.

“We meet to lay the foundation for the establishment of a new nation: a democratic Palestinian state that will live side by side with Israel in peace and security,” Mr. Bush told officials from 49 countries gathered at the United States Naval Academy.

Flanked by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel and the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, Mr. Bush cast peace between Israelis and Palestinians as part of a broader struggle against extremism in the Middle East.

It was a moment of diplomatic theater, endorsed by the attendance of a member of the Saudi royal family and framed by many participants' concerns over the increasing influence of Iran and Islamic radicalism in the region.

The moment was orchestrated by Mr. Bush, who pledged that the United States would "monitor and judge the fulfillment of the commitment of both sides." The agreement, cast as a "joint understanding" between the Israelis and the Palestinians, fell short of the detailed five-page document that Palestinian officials have been seeking. But it went somewhat further than the Israelis had wanted, calling for an immediate start to wide-ranging talks aimed at reaching a final accord within 13 months.

"We agree to immediately launch good-faith bilateral negotiations in order to conclude a peace treaty, resolving all outstanding issues, including all core issues without exception, as specified in previous agreements," the joint understanding said. "We agree to engage in vigorous, ongoing and continuous negotiations, and shall make every effort to conclude an agreement before the end of 2008."

It was not clear until Mr. Bush, Mr. Olmert and Mr. Abbas stepped onto the podium in the ornate frescoed Memorial Hall at the Naval Academy, near a replica battle flag from the War of 1812 declaring "Don't Give Up the Ship," whether the Israelis and Palestinians had agreed on anything.

Even on Tuesday morning, Mr. Bush held last-minute talks with Mr. Olmert and Mr. Abbas, while outside the room, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice buttonholed the chief Israeli and Palestinian negotiators, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni of Israel and Ahmed Qurei, a former Palestinian prime minister, to wring agreement on the wording of the accord.

In making the announcement, Mr. Bush read aloud the joint understanding wearing his glasses, suggesting that there had not been enough time to convert the newly completed document to large type for his speech.

Mr. Abbas shook hands with Mr. Olmert and Mr. Bush and then pointedly and emotionally put all of the most divisive issues squarely at the center of the talks that are scheduled to begin on Dec. 12.

“I am not making an overstatement, Mr. President, if I say that our region stands at a crossroad that separates two historical phases: pre-Annapolis phase and post-Annapolis phase,” Mr. Abbas said. “I say that this opportunity might not be repeated. And if it were to be repeated, it might not enjoy the same unanimity and impetus.”

When Mr. Olmert spoke, he too was emotional and highly personal. “We want peace,” he said. “We demand an end to terror, an end to incitement and to hatred. We are prepared to make a painful compromise, rife with risks, in order to realize these aspirations.”

The gathering brought about the highest-level official contacts yet between Israel and Saudi Arabia, which do not have diplomatic relations. Seated across the room and squeezed between the delegates from Senegal and Qatar, Prince Saud al-Faisal, the Saudi foreign minister, took notes during Mr. Olmert’s remarks, his head slightly bowed. When he arrived in Washington on Monday for the conference, Prince Saud vowed that he would not shake Mr. Olmert’s hand.

Mr. Olmert looked directly across the hall at Prince Saud and said that Israel aspired to “normalization” with the Arab world.

“There’s quite a lot that separates us,” Mr. Olmert said. “Nevertheless, there is also a great deal that we share. Like us, you know that religious fanaticism and national extremism are a perfect recipe for domestic instability and violence, for bitterness and ultimately for the disintegration of the very foundations of coexistence based on tolerance and mutual acceptance.”

When the Israeli leader finished his speech, Prince Saud politely clapped. Later, during remarks to the foreign ministers, Prince Saud said that “the time has come for Israel to put its trust in peace after it has gambled on war for decades without success.” He called on Israel to withdraw from the West Bank.

Palestinian officials said one obstacle to the joint statement had been Israel’s refusal to include a reference to the Arab League peace initiative. That initiative, which was reaffirmed by Arab nations this year, called on Israelis and Palestinians to reach an “agreed” resolution of the refugee issue.

Israeli officials do not like that term and have been adamant that Palestinian refugees have a right of return only to a future Palestinian state, not to Israel. They fear that including the Arab League language in the joint statement could handcuff them later in negotiations.

The two sides resolved the issue by leaving mention of the Arab League initiative out of the joint understanding. But Mr. Abbas and Mr. Olmert mentioned it during their speeches.

Mr. Bush cast the reinvigorated negotiations as a historic moment, an opportunity to advance democracy in a region torn by conflict, with the United States and its troops intricately entwined in it. “And when liberty takes root in the rocky soil of the West Bank and Gaza, it will inspire millions across the Middle East who want their societies built on freedom and peace and hope,” he said.

The significance he assigned to overcoming the Israeli-Palestinian conflict echoes the importance he has previously assigned to efforts in Iraq. That country, and the American war there, went unmentioned in Mr. Bush’s remarks on Tuesday, though he did mention Lebanon’s aspirations for peace and independence from Syrian influence.

Iraq declined to attend the conference here, said the State Department spokesman, Sean McCormack.

The White House said Mr. Bush's role would be as a mediator, willing to weigh in on the negotiations when necessary, but leaving the workaday details of American diplomacy to his secretary of state, Ms. Rice.

"Secretary Rice will be doing a lot of that heavy lifting, in terms of the travel to the region and helping them, as she has been," said the White House press secretary, [Dana Perino](#), describing the difficult diplomacy ahead. "But what the president told the leaders today is that he's only a phone call away."

Middle East experts said that perhaps the best thing to come out of the Annapolis conference was that it had publicly committed Mr. Bush, Mr. Olmert and Mr. Abbas to pressing for peace.

"Annapolis means that everyone has a lot more invested," said Daniel Levy, a former Israeli negotiator. But, he added, "Now there's also a lot more to lose."